

Wildlife Diversity News

A Publication of the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program

Volume 9, Issue 2

Summer 2010

Summer 2010 Falcon Report

Spring 2010 heralded the first year Peregrine Falcons were upgraded from Endangered to Species of Special Concern status in Iowa. This year sixteen territories with ten successful nests produced 21 young.

In Des Moines two young were produced at American Republic Insurance building. Female at this site is 39E (banded at NSP Riverside plant in 2003), here for a second year. Male is 63B, who was banded at Woodman Tower, Omaha, NE, in 2004. A second Des Moines territory, at the State Capitol, produced one young. Female is unbanded and male is 39A (American Republic, 2008), here for his first year.

In Cedar Rapids a brood of four young were banded by Jodeane Cancilla of Macbride Raptor Project. This site is stewarded by Theresa Chapel at USBank. Female *S/5* (Des Moines, IA, 1998) is here for her twelfth year and seven-year-old male 78E (Kokomo, IN, 2003) is here for his sixth year.

A new cliff site near Lansing called Dead Cow Bluff fledged one young, banded by Bob Anderson, Dave Kester and Amy Reis of Raptor Resource Project. Bob Anderson also reported pairs at another Lansing cliff site (two fledged), Leo's Bluff near Waukon Junction (nest

unsuccessful), and Agri-Bunge Elevator in McGregor (three young).

In Dubuque, an unidentified pair at the Wisconsin Bridge were defending a territory from intruders. Further downriver at Clinton, an unidentified pair had an unsuccessful nest attempt at Alliant Energy's ML Knapp Generating Station. Female is a "brown bird," indicating this is her first nesting season. Even in the bird world, practice makes perfect! This site is located at southern extent of historic peregrine nesting range along the Mississippi flyway in Iowa. Also in Clinton a new pair fledged three young at the ADM plant.

At I-80 Bridge in the Quad Cities, an unidentified pair defended territory, but no eyrie (nest site) or young was detected. The nest tray has not been used and is now moved to the upstream side of the Illinois side of the channel. The pair at MidAmerican Headquarters in the Quad Cities (8/*E, Muncie, IN, 1999 and P/D, Dubuque, IA, 1999) was back for their eighth year and successfully fledged two young.

An unidentified falcon pair in Muscatine defended their eyrie under a bridge from intruders, as reported by



Peregrine falcon chicks waiting to be banded
© 2009 Jenni Dyar

Mark Washburn. At the Louisa Generating Station, Jim Haack reported four young successfully hatched from 06/A female (St. Louis, MO, 2005) and unidentified male for ninth year. However, when banding was attempted in June, no chicks were present. Later a second clutch of four eggs was reported with an estimated hatch date in mid-July.

At the Great River Bridge in Burlington an unidentified pair, here for the seventh year, fledged one young. Finally, at Alliant Energy's Ottumwa Generating Station in Chillicothe, Judi Johnson reports eleven-year-old female Z/V (NSP Riverside, Minneapolis, MN, 1999) and male 23 N were successful, and two young fledged.

Each falcon site has stewards that partner with the Wildlife Diversity Program. The success of Iowa's falcon population is a result of these volunteers and deserve a huge thank you from all Iowans.

- Pat Schlarbaum
Wildlife Diversity Tech II

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Notes from the (Empty) Catbird Seat

As many of you know, last month Doug Harr retired after a 38+ year career with the Iowa DNR, the last 9 as the Wildlife Diversity Program Coordinator. As part of the plan to meet budget cuts, his position will remain unfilled for the near future. Notes from the Catbird Seat will return once the seat is no longer empty.

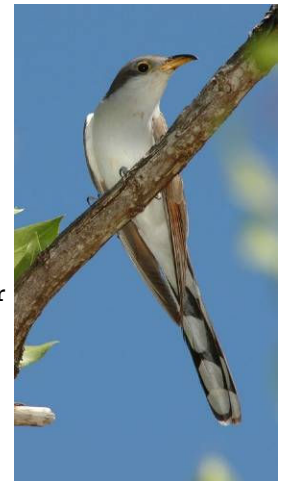
Diversity Dispatch

Breaking News in the Wide World of Wildlife

“Double-clutching”--not just for manual transmission drivers!

Biologists studying songbirds stopping in western Mexico during southward migration found that for some species there is actually a second breeding season occurring during that migration. At least five species - Yellow-billed Cuckoo*, Orchard Oriole*, Hooded Oriole, Cassin's Vireo, and Yellow-breasted Chat* (* = Iowa breeding species) - regularly engage in a second breeding season during their stopover in the lowland thorn forests of coastal west Mexico and Baja California Sur before migrating further south to their final wintering areas. This second nesting occurs during the local monsoon season, which lasts from June through August. Further investigation is surely necessary, as this surprising dual breeding season may reveal a flexibility in the lives of these birds that was previously unknown. This discovery underscores the fact that future conservation plans may need to consider additional new factors when being established.

(excerpted from November, 2009 Birding Community E-Bulletin)



Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Photo by Jay Bass

Surprise whale visitor in the Mediterranean

Twice in the last three months a gray whale, thought to be extirpated from the Atlantic Ocean, has been seen in the Mediterranean Sea. Historically there were three major populations of gray whales: two in the northern Pacific Ocean and one in the north Atlantic. The north Atlantic population died off sometime in the 17th or 18th century, for reasons that are unknown, and both Pacific populations are considered critically endangered. No sightings of the species in the Atlantic Ocean were reported for 200 years, until early May when one was photographed off the coast of Israel and confirmed to be a gray whale. Gray whales are known to migrate extremely long distances, making a 15,000-20,000km loop between summer and winter grounds each year. Over a lifetime, gray whales will travel a distance equivalent to going to the moon and back! Scientists are currently trying to figure out if this is one really lost whale, or a sign that the gray whale may be returning to the Atlantic Ocean.



Nature's Aphid Harvester

If the visual appeal of having butterflies around isn't reason enough to want to attract them to your yard, here's something more practical – caterpillars of the harvester butterfly (*Feniseca tarquinius*) are carnivorous, feeding on woolly aphids. While most healthy, mature trees and shrubs can tolerate the aphids, which feed on sap, they can significantly weaken recently transplanted or stressed plants. Signs of aphid damage include off-color foliage, poor plant growth, and branch dieback. As soon as a harvester caterpillar hatches, it begins feeding on woolly aphids. The woolly aphid diet works so well for the caterpillar that after only 8 days it is ready to make a chrysalis and begin transforming into a butterfly.

Photo by Mike Reese, wisconsinbutterflies.org



Iowa's Teaming With Wildlife Coalition

Over 230 groups working together to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered.

Summertime, and the Atlasing is Easy!

Summer is heating up and so is Iowa's 2nd Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA). At this time of year, confirming a breeding species can be very easy because nests are full of eggs or nestlings and fledglings seem to be everywhere you look. Recall that the BBA is a five-year project (2008 - 2012) where volunteers collect information on the habitat and distribution of Iowa's breeding birds. Since the spring issue of the *Wildlife Diversity News*, BBA volunteers have logged an additional 820 hours of observation time, completed 5 more blocks, and visited 94 blocks previously unvisited. We are making great progress and this is definitely the time to do it as we approach both the midpoint of the project and the midpoint of the 2010 breeding season.

How are volunteers doing it? Well, there are many tactics being employed throughout the state. Some birders prefer to atlas in peaceful solitude, accompanied only by an Iowa sunrise and the dawn chorus of bird song. Other birders meet with their local birding group for BBA-focused fieldtrips. These group trips are a great way to record lots of species in the company of birders of all levels, with multiple sets of eyes and ears to identify every flash of color or song darting through the leaves. Still other volunteers have participated in this summer's BBA blockbusting events, where birders converge from all over the state to focus their atlasing efforts on a certain region where there is a high concentration of blocks that have really low or no visitation.

So far this summer's blockbusting events have been a smashing success. Thanks to all the folks who helped organize and participate in these events; your enthusiasm and dedication were inspiring. During the Burlington/Muscatine blockbuster (May 21-23), 14 birders visited 24 blocks throughout Des Moines, Henry, Iowa, Louisa, Muscatine, and Washington Counties. At the Brushy Creek blockbuster (June 7), 7 birders visited 3 blocks in southeast Webster

County. During the Clinton/Dubuque blockbuster (June 18-20), 19 birders visited 26 blocks within Buchanan, Clinton, Delaware, Dubuque, Jackson, and Jones Counties. As you can imagine, these events are not only great opportunities for data collection, but also for great networking with other birders and exploring new parts of the state.

If you have missed the previous events, there is still one more chance to be a blockbuster this summer. The Lake Red Rock blockbusting weekend (July 9-11) will focus on blocks in Marion and Warren Counties. The weekend will begin with a presentation about the BBA on Friday evening at 9 PM at the North Overlook Amphitheater. Volunteers will learn how to participate, how to determine breeding bird status, and how to turn in observations. Then Saturday and Sunday, volunteers will be out in blocks searching for nesting birds. For more information on blockbusting, atlasing, or up-to date progress, contact me or check out the website at: <http://bba.iowabirds.org>. I hope to see you all out at Lake Red Rock.

Happy Birding!



Juvenile Mourning Doves
Photo by Doug Harr

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NEW!

NEW!

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Coming to Roost: an Update on Barn Owls in Iowa

The barn owl has never been considered a common Iowa species, partly because Iowa is on the northern edge of its breeding range. In the early 1900s, this species was found across much of Iowa - but, according to Bert Bailey (B.H. Bailey, *The Raptorial Birds of Iowa*: 1918), "this peculiar owl is counted rare in Iowa because of its strictly nocturnal habits." For many decades the barn owl probably fared well - until major agricultural land use changes occurred in the early 1970s. It has been listed as an Iowa Endangered Species since 1977.

Today, this beautiful animal is one of Iowa's rarest birds of prey, and only a privileged few Iowans are able to view this monkey-faced owl each year. The barn owl's preferred habitat is open country with a scattering of grasslands, savannas, wetlands, pastures, and hayfields. It is often associated with humans because of its propensity to roost and nest in buildings, particularly on farmsteads. Grassland habitat loss has no doubt been the largest factor in its decline, since Iowa has lost over 99% of its native prairie and ~98% of its original wetlands.

With only eight nest records noted for the Iowa barn owl from 1950 to 1982, the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program decided to make an effort to assist this species. 427 barn owls were released in 28 counties from 1983 to 1987. Radio tracking of 36 of these released birds indicated that perhaps one-third of them were eaten by great-horned owls and another one-third of these owls died from other causes. While the number of barn owls sighted annually during this project increased substantially, none of the released barn owls were documented nesting. To further enhance the nesting potential of release site areas, nest boxes were erected. Many of these nest boxes have since been used as nest sites by barn owls.

Undoubtedly the greatest boon to the barn owl in several decades was the addition of over two million acres of grassland, idled in Iowa under the

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) of the 1985 Farm Bill. In 1994, six Iowa barn owl nests were confirmed, the most nests recorded ever in one year. Three nests were in nest boxes, and all nests occurred next to large tracts of CRP grassland. During 1995, 12 nests were documented in six counties: Taylor, Wayne, Ringgold, Mills, Guthrie, and Tama. Seven of the nests were in nest boxes, and five of these nests were on the property of former "Barn Owl Guardian," Zelbert Freemyer, in Taylor County. Zelbert is no longer with us today, but from 1989 through 2005, at least 50 barn owls fledged from his nest boxes. I think it is safe to say that no single Iowa landowner contributed more to the survival of the barn owl than Zelbert.

In recent years, it seems the barn owl has been making a comeback. After several years of mild winters in the early 2000s, barn owl numbers were steadily growing, with 8 nests reported each in 2005 and 2006. Even with a very rainy season in 2007, there were still 6 nests reported. All told, barn owls were reported in 16 counties in 2007.

Harsh winters and above average annual rainfall since 2007 may have led to declines in the number of barn owls reported. In 2009, only two barn owl nests were documented: one nest each in Calhoun and Taylor counties, but evidence of a third nest site was found when two young barn owls were heard food begging near Honey Creek Resort in Appanoose County. So far in 2010, no barn owl nests have been reported, but there have been barn owls sighted in Taylor, Decatur, and Mahaska counties. Since barn owls often nest later in the summer (and even fall), it is hoped that nest reports are still forthcoming.



Photo by Matt Wetrich

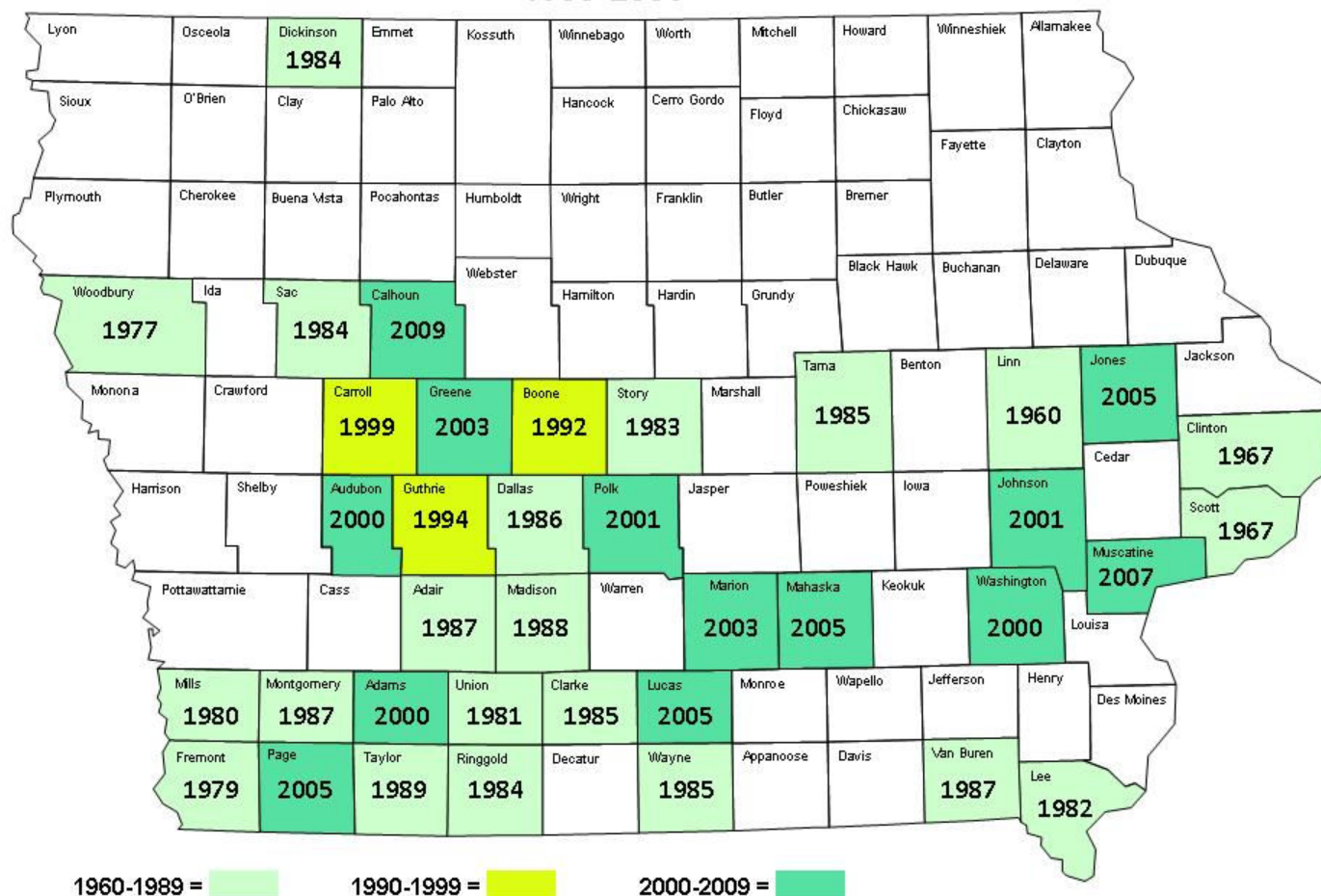
Since 1960, Iowa DNR records indicate that barn owls have nested in 36 counties. As you can see from the map on the next page, 14 of these county nest records have occurred since 2000, which I interpret as a good sign for the barn owl (assuming no more loss of Iowa grasslands). The southern half the state, and especially southwestern Iowa, continues to be the barn owl stronghold, but who knows what effects our changing climate might have for future distribution. As always, the critical element for its survival will most likely be whether or not there continues to be enough appropriate habitat.

As a result of its efforts to help the barn owl, the DNR gained valuable information about barn owl life history in Iowa, and we now have a much better idea of where these birds prefer to nest. Emphasis of the program now is directed at placing nest boxes in quality habitat areas (grasslands) where these owls are known to occur and encouraging landowners to maintain and restore prairie remnants, savannas, or other grassland areas which benefit this unique species.

If you have a barn owl sighting to report or want information on putting up your own barn owl nest box, please contact me by phone (515-432-2823 ext. 106) or e-mail (Bruce.Ehresman@dnr.iowa.gov).

- Bruce Ehresman
Avian Ecologist

**First Year in which a Barn Owl Nest was Reported,
1960-2009**



Enjoying the Virtual Outdoors

In Iowa, June and July is a time when all of Iowa's critters seem to revel in their surroundings - including us humans. It is a great time to be outside especially if you enjoy watching a diverse array of wildlife. Sometimes it's nice to just sit back and watch behaviors or enjoy the activity around you, but often for me it also raises a lot of questions, some as simple as "What *IS* that"? This is where the "virtual" outdoors comes in.

There are a lot of great internet resources out there on all kinds of wildlife which can help answer many questions. Many are Iowa specific. Here are a few of my favorites:

www.herpnet.net: Found a bright green snake in your yard or tiny frog with stripes? This is a great Iowa and Minnesota specific website that can help you identify those critters and also tell you all kinds of interesting biological and natural history information about them.

www.iowaodes.org: The website for the Iowa Odonata Survey which will not only help you identify those dragonflies and damselflies but will allow you to report

any interesting sightings.

www.iowabirds.org: The official sight for the Iowa Ornithologists Union (IOU) which is chock full of checklists and lots of other information about birds in Iowa.

<http://wisconsinbutterflies.org/>: Not Iowa specific but a great website with fantastic pictures of many butterflies that also occur in Iowa.

www.bugguide.net: Run out of Iowa State University, this national website allows you to post pictures of that weird insect you found in your yard and get feedback from professional and amateur entomologists from around the country. Can also help you track down the i.d. yourself with a search function and many indexed photos.

Some other great virtual resources are listservs. Iowa has a few great listservs that allow you to interact with other outdoor enthusiasts through e-mail and get daily updates on interesting natural happenings. The three I subscribe to are:



Iowa Bird Listserv: Sign up for this one through the IOU website and get daily e-mails about interesting bird sightings across the state.

<http://www.iowabirds.org/iou/IA-BIRD.asp>



Iowa Insect Listserv: A fairly new, fascinating and active listserv raising interest and awareness about all the interesting insects out there.

<http://www.cgrer.uiowa.edu/herbarium/InsectMaList.htm>



Iowa Native Plants Listserv: A great listserv highlighting plants and habitat restoration/management.

<http://www.cgrer.uiowa.edu/herbarium/MailingList.htm>

So I hope you enjoy getting outside this summer and observing all the wildlife activity. And when the heat starts cooking your brain, head on inside with all your questions and explore the virtual outdoors!

- Stephanie Shepherd
Surveys & Data Coordinator

From the Field

The word amphibian means "life on both sides," referring to the two very different lifestyles of the immature and adult animals. Amphibian eggs are typically laid in water, and the hatchlings have external gills and a tail to allow them to get around in the water easily. Once they are ready to become adults and move onto land, they go through a metamorphosis, growing four legs and lungs. Right now is the time of year when most amphibians are going through this transformation—making it the perfect time to find and observe metamorphs! In this photo (right), an American toad metamorph has some characteristics of both juvenile and adult. Note the shape of the jaw and stub of a tail, all that remains from its days as a tadpole. Soon both will disappear completely and this toad will be a fully-formed adult. Frogs and salamanders are the other species in Iowa who live this dual lifestyle.



American Toad Metamorph
© 2010 Jenni Dyar

Species Spotlight: Sioux Snaketail

It's a warm sunny morning at your favorite fishing spot. A light breeze rustles the leaves of the trees on the bank across from you. As you cast out into the water, a large insect flies up to investigate. It stops about 10 feet from you, hovering in the air and seeming to stare you down. You stand still and stare back. Satisfied you're not a threat, the dragonfly resumes its patrol over the water.

It turns out dragonflies have been patrolling waterways for 325 million years. They possess the exceptional ability to flap all four of their wings independently, which allows them to hover, fly backward, and even perform loop-the-loops.

The Sioux Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus smithi*) is a relatively new species of dragonfly, recently discovered in Wisconsin and Iowa. Its scientific name honors William Smith of the Wisconsin DNR, who has done a lot of work with dragonflies in both Iowa and Wisconsin. Part of the clubtail family, its thorax is mostly green with black stripes. The abdomen is black with yellow markings, and its body length averages 1.8 inches. It can be found patrolling small to medium-sized clean, fast-flowing streams, usually with a sandy bottom, between late May and mid-June. Because it is such a new species, not much is known about its distribution in Iowa.

Dragonflies are predators. As larvae, they eat insect larvae (including mosquitoes), tadpoles, and even small fish. Adults are visual hunters, catching mosquitoes and other insects. They depend on clean water – females lay their eggs either directly in the water or attached to aquatic vegetation at the surface. Upon hatching, the larvae (also called nymphs or naiads) grow and develop under water. They remain there until they reach adulthood, shedding their exoskeleton anywhere from 8-17 times before emerging as an adult. The shed exoskeletons left behind are called exuviae, and are used by researchers as

an indication that dragonflies are breeding in the area.

When the adults emerge, they are extremely vulnerable. Their exoskeleton and wings need time to harden. During this time, the adult dragonflies (called teneral) depend on upland habitats like grasslands and woodlands for shelter and food. The hardening process can take anywhere from days to a few weeks. Once they can fly, male dragonflies will set up a territory between one and 100 square yards in size. They will patrol their territory, looking for females and chasing off any intruding males.

As interest in dragonflies grows, so will our understanding of their habits and needs. The presence of dragonflies in an area points to high quality wetland habitat nearby. Next time you see one, whether it is sunning on a rock or out on patrol, take time to appreciate this little insect helicopter!

- Jenni Dyar, AmeriCorps
Wildlife Diversity Research Assistant



Photo by Matt Berg



Last Look

Warm summer days mean you can't go outside without seeing at least one butterfly. And really, who would want it any other way?

Red admiral on Canada thistle
© 2010 Jenni Dyar



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Events Calendar

Friday, July 9-Sunday, July 11

Red Rock BBA Blockbusting Weekend

Where: Marion and Warren counties

*Come for a few hours or the whole weekend!

Friday, July 9 @ 9 PM - BBA Presentation & Training at North Overlook Amphitheater, just off County Hwy T-15 north of the dam, Lake Red Rock

Sat. July 10 & Sun. July 11 - Birding in Marion & Warren Co.

For more information, contact Billy Reiter-Marolf: bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org

Saturday, July 24: 11am

Hogs for Frogs Motorcycle Fun Run

Where: Blank Park Zoo

Pre-register at www.blankparkzoo.com or call (515) 974-2588

*Money raised will benefit the DNR's Frog and Toad Survey volunteer wildlife monitoring program!

Friday, Aug. 6-Saturday, Aug. 7

Whiterock Conservancy Bioblitz

Where: Whiterock Conservancy, Coon Rapids, Guthrie County

*For more info and to register, contact Elizabeth Hill at (712) 684-2697 ext. 114 or Elizabeth@whiterockconservancy.org

Saturday, Aug. 7-Sunday, Aug. 8

Dewey's Pasture Bioblitz

Where: Dewey's Pasture Bird Conservation Area, Clay & Palo Alto Counties

*For more information, go to: www.paccb.org/Program%20&%20Events1.htm

Thursday, Aug. 12-Sunday, Aug. 22

Iowa State Fair

Where: Fairgrounds, Des Moines

*Make sure to visit the DNR building, located near the west gate at E. Grand & 30th St!

Sunday, Sept. 26: 11am

Chichaqua Bottoms A-mazing Prairie Festival

Where: Chichaqua Bottoms, Polk County